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Period 4

AP Lit

October 5, 2009

Ironic Elements in Short Stories

Most short stories of literary merit involve some type of irony that allows the work to make an observation about the peculiar ways of human behavior and the ambiguity of everyday life. Irony is presented indirectly so that the reader can feel the emotion of the text rather than be told how to react. One main characteristic of irony is that it conveys the difference between what is expected and what actually happens. Irony is used to illuminate a truth about humanity, and is often utilized in short stories to make a subtle observation about occurrences in various environments.

Many short stories employ irony to add meaning to the story’s theme. “Hunters in the Snow,” by Tobias Wolff, tells the tale of three men and their individual troubles in life. The story describes a hunting trip gone wrong and the way in which the characters deal with the situation. The text relies heavily on irony as almost all of the story’s elements are ironic in some way, including the story’s most important event. Woody Allen’s “The Kugelmass Episode” is another short story that utilizes irony as its main literary device. The story is about a professor named Kugelmass who cannot bear his wife anymore and embarks on an affair. However, he finds that even when all his desires come true, he cannot achieve genuine happiness. The results of Kugelmass’ search are laden with irony and emphasize the ultimate meaning of the text. The irony in both stories serves as a means to enhance the theme of the story as well as to convey a main idea.

The first type of irony in “Hunters in the Snow” is verbal irony. The text shows verbal irony in the form of a figure of speech. An example of verbal irony in “Hunters in the Snow” occurs when Frank tells Tub to stop complaining and center himself (Wolff 87). This incident provides an example of irony because Frank is actually in just as much need of some centering as Tub, if not more. Both Frank and Tub have major problems in their lives but Frank’s dilemma is that he is in love with a fifteen year old girl. Compared to Tub’s problem of overeating, Frank is certainly more unbalanced than his friend. This example of verbal irony helps add depth to the text by showing us Frank’s outlook on the situation and how flawed it is in reality.

The second type of irony in “Hunters in the Snow” is situational irony. This kind of irony shows the difference between what is expected and what actually happens. Situational irony is probably the most important element in “Hunters in the Snow” because it exhibits the focal point of the whole story. This point occurs when Tub panics and shoots Kenny in the stomach without meaning to (Wolff 91). This event is an example of situational irony because throughout the first half of the story, Kenny teased and bullied Tub relentlessly. The fact that Tub shoots Kenny after all the belittling Tub has had to endure from his supposed friend is ironic because Tub suddenly becomes the one to cause pain rather than Kenny. This type of irony defines the story by emphasizing the truth about the characters’ situation in a way that adds depth to the story’s meaning.

The third type of irony in “Hunters in the Snow” is dramatic irony. Dramatic irony is the discrepancy between what a character believes to be true and what the reader knows to be true. This type of irony occurs when Tub and Frank think they are driving Kenny to the hospital when they are actually going the wrong way (Wolff 99). This situation presents dramatic irony because the reader knows the characters’ expectations will not be fulfilled. Dramatic irony enhances the text by showing a side of the story that the character is not aware of, despite the fact that it involves the character.

Verbal irony is a powerful tool that many authors use to compare or contrast several elements of a short story. This type of irony can be used for the same purpose but is presented in different ways. For example, the verbal irony in “The Kugelmass Episode” occurs when the professor’s analyst tells him, “…I’m an analyst, not a magician” (Allen 349). Kugelmass’ therapist cannot help him have an affair so Kugelmass decides to enlist the help of a magician, exactly who the therapist claimed not to be. Towards the end of the story, Kugelmass is anxious because the machine that sends Emma home is malfunctioning. When Kugelmass complains to Persky the magician, Persky responds with, “I’m a magician, not an analyst” (Allen 356). This play on words is an example of verbal irony as well as a means to convey the futility of Kugelmass’ situation. This example of verbal irony differs in comparison to the verbal irony in “Hunters in the Snow” as it is presented in a much more direct manner.

Dramatic irony in “The Kugelmass Episode” occurs at the end when Kugelmass is being chased in a remedial Spanish book by the verb “tener” which means “to have” (Allen 358). This is extremely ironic because the entirety of the story involves Kugelmass’ desire” to have” more. Kugelmass discovers that he has doomed himself to an eternity of agony rather than a lifetime of happiness. The dramatic irony in this story provides a visual representation of the situation in which Kugelmass has become entangled.

Situational irony in “The Kugelmass Episode” occurs when the magical cabinet fails to send Emma back to her book (Allen 355). This begins a chain of events that show Kugelmass and Emma slowly beginning to despise each other. It is ironic because the girl of Kugelmass’ dreams becomes the biggest nuisance of his life as well as the exact opposite of what he spent so much effort trying to obtain. The situational irony in “The Kugelmass Episode” illustrates the tendency of perfection to quickly turn sour, despite how ideal it may seem.

Irony is one of the most important literary elements in a short story as it has the ability to develop an idea into the story’s theme. Without irony, short stories would be weak, bland, and far less impressive.

Works Cited

Arp, Thomas R., and Greg Johnson. Perrine's Literature: Structure, Sound, and Sense. Boston, MA: Heinle, 2008.